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THE INDIAN CROW: HIS BOOK

BY

DOUGLAS DEWAR, B.A. (*Cantab.*), F.Z.S.,
AUTHOR OF "*Animals of No Importance.*"



Madras:
HIGGINBOTHAM & Co.

1905.

Notas printed in bed-
rooms, Galle Face Hotel, Colombo
"Visitors are requested not to
leave Articles of Jewelry, etc. as they
are liable to be carried away
by the Crows."



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P R E F A C E.

Of prefaces there are two species—the preface apologetic and the preface defiant. The former displays two well-marked varieties—the only-at-the-instigation-of-friends preface, and the this-book-is-full-of-faults-and-no-one-is-more-conscious-of-them-than-the-author preface.

It is obviously not open to me to adopt the former of these varieties, for, like the worthy George Washington, I cannot tell a lie, especially when there is no chance of its obtaining credence.

Nor am I going to fall back upon the second variety of the preface apologetic. It seems to me that it is intended only for hypocrites and simpletons.

If you are trying to sell a horse, you don't say to the prospective purchaser "I'm afraid he is rather a crock. He fell down three times yesterday. You will notice that his knees are cut, that he is a bit dicky about the hind quarters, and that he is touched in the wind. He is a trifle free with his hind legs, and jibs like fury, but I have had his teeth filed down to improve his appearance." If you are honest, you say as little as possible about the horse, you merely whisper to yourself *caveat emptor*.

If honesty is not your strong point, you—er, well, you don't dwell upon the horse's faults; to do so would be unkind.

I am honest, so I say as little as possible about the contents of this book. Thus we have eliminated all but the preface defiant. So here goes. I offer no apology for producing this book. Far from it. I apologise for the

previous neglect of the splendid bird by those naturalists who have already served their time in the Gorgeous East.

Is it fitting, nay, is it decent, that the Crow who forms part and parcel of human existence in the Land of Regrets, should have no book he can call his own, no scroll upon which his doughty deeds are writ large ?

Horses—noble creatures, dogs—dear things, cats—obnoxious quadrupeds, pigeons—self-satisfied birds, fowls—estimable beings, and even whales—unwieldly monsters, have books devoted exclusively to them.

Much more then should the Indian crow have his book.—*Q.E.D.*

Lovers of the crow will doubtless read and cherish this booklet. Those who love not the “treble-dated” bird will find in this brochure a most convenient missile to hurl at the offend-

ing bird. Those who are indifferent to the crow—but, stay, do such exist? I trow not. They are mere figments of the brain, shadowy forms, which have no terror for even the timid writer.

Gentle reader, is it necessary for me to say that this wordy effusion has led, step by step, line upon line, to the irresistible conclusion that no one can afford to be without this little book?

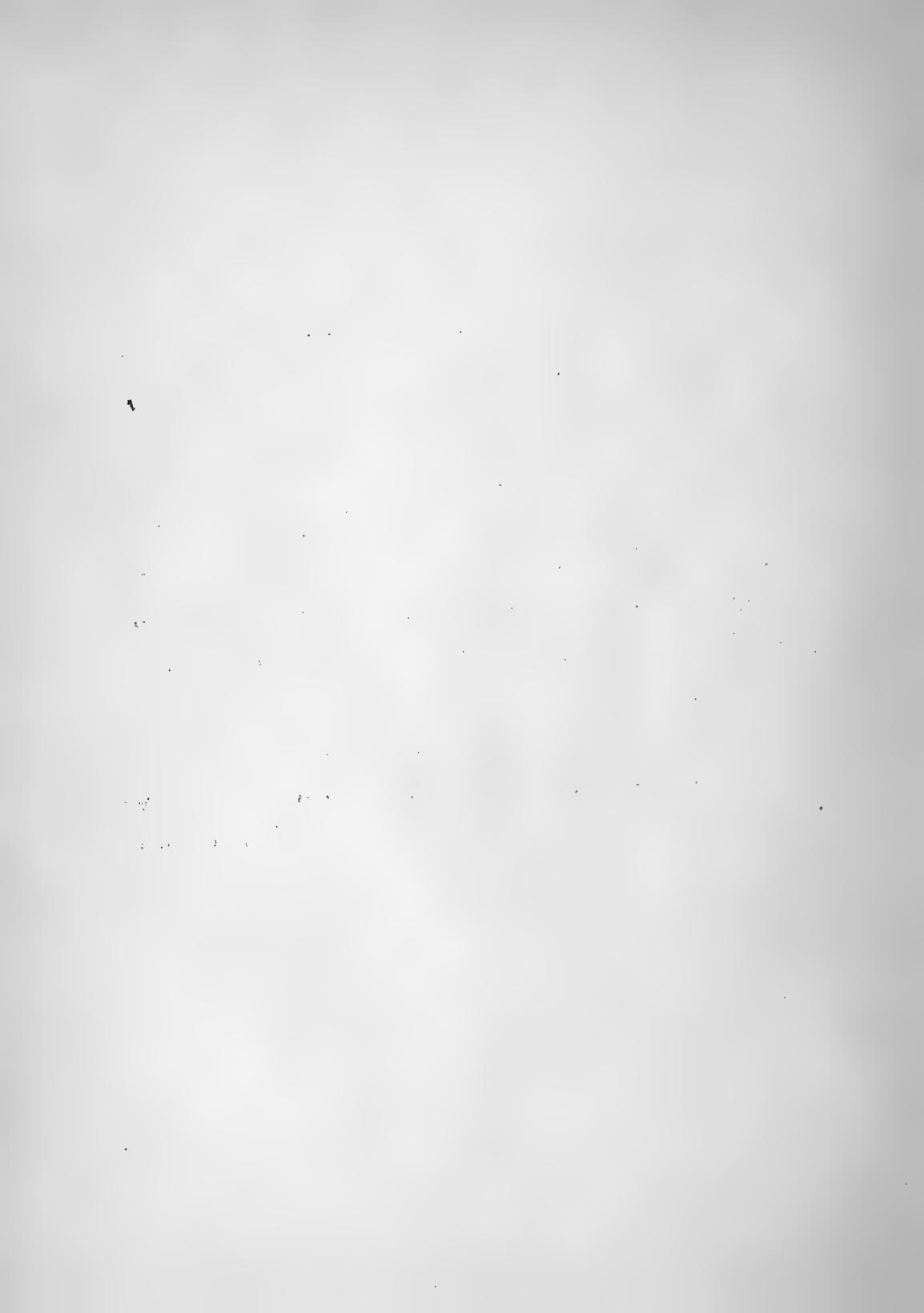
MADRAS, *April 1st, 1905.*



A considerable portion of this book has already appeared in print.

Chapters I and II made their *début* in *The Morning Post* (Delhi). Chapter III made its bow in a slightly different form in *The Madras Mail*. Certain incidents in the remaining chapters are reproduced almost *verbatim* from an article which appeared in *Longman's Magazine*.

It is owing to the kindness of the editors of the above-named publications that these chapters on the Indian crow have assumed book form.



“In all respects, physiological, morphological and ornithological, the crow may be placed at the head, not only of its own real series (birds of the crow form), but also as the unchallenged chief of the whole of the carinatae.”—Parker.

CONTENTS.



CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
His Chits 1

CHAPTER II.

His Methods of Obtaining a Livelihood	... 9
---------------------------------------	-------

CHAPTER III.

His Domestic Affairs 24
----------------------------------	--------

CHAPTER IV.

His Habits 35
------------------------	--------

CHAPTER V.

His Amusements 49
---------------------------	--------

CHAPTER VI.

His Foes 59
----------------------	--------



CHAPTER I.

HIS CHITS.

A NATIVE without *chits* is like a ship without a helm. *Corvus splendens*, being an oriental bird and accustomed to Indian ways, would be most unhappy were I to introduce him without first showing his testimonials, indifferent although many of them be. In this country, however, as everyone who has been a month in it has discovered, so long as a man has a good supply of *chits* their subject-matter is of no importance ; it is also a matter of supreme indifference whether the contents of the aforesaid *chits* refer to the holder, his great grandfather, or any other person. So long as a servant is able to flaunt a package of greasy testimonials before his future master, this latter has no right to demand more.

Of *chits* the crow has a multitude. These are all his very own ; they refer to him and not to any other

bird. What is more, they bear many illustrious signatures, and they are, one and all, written as the result of much reflection, and not, as is the case with most of the Indian servant's *chits*, scribbled on the platform as the train is coming into the station, or composed by a worn-out individual squatting on a packing case in a bungalow rendered a Tower of Babel by a number of coolies doing a little furniture removing. Another reason why the *chits* of the crow contain real opinions is that the bird is without the pale of the Indian Penal Code. He is *doli incapax*. This means that he may steal your property and you cannot prosecute him. But, on the other hand, you may abuse him to your heart's content and he cannot bring a defamation case against you. Nay more, you may shoot him without fear of a police-officer appearing on the premises next day. If you kill a crow the worst that can happen is that all the rest of the corvidae of the neighbourhood will come and abuse you, and possibly one or two superstitious servants may desert during the night.

Some of the crow's testimonials date from very early times. Thus the sage Pratyasatka said, far back in the dim vista of time, "nothing can improve

a crow." That worthy philosopher intended to imply that the crow was so depraved as to be beyond redemption. The sagacious bird, however, has been sharp enough to notice the ambiguity of the utterance, which might have emanated from the Delphic Oracle. He takes advantage of this to interpret the saying as meaning that the crow is perfect, hence no improvement is possible, that he has attained the highest pinnacle of righteousness and can therefore mount no higher. Fortunately for the crow he is able to adduce some evidence in support of his contention, for the Hindu law-giver, Manu, once said "a good wife should be like a crow." The bird treasures up this saying, it is to him as the apple of his eye.

There is, however, nothing ambiguous about the testimonials which the British poets have given the crow. In this case the bards have made no bones about calling a spade a spade. A few extracts from their *chits* follow. There is, I submit, no beating about the bush in them. "The ignoble crow," "The dastard crow," "Lurking villain crow," "The perditious crow," "The treble-dated crow." If you tell a crow that these hard names should make him hide his diminished head, he puts that organ on one

side, winks the left eye, and says with a loud caw “ those refer to my English cousins, and not to me. British crows are indeed naughty creatures, but even they have one good *chit*, for did not the poet Shelley call them ‘ prophetic birds,’ and it is for this reason that they have no honour in their own country.”

The naturalist, being a student of animal character, probes below the surface ; he carefully analyses the mind of the crow, and for this reason his testimonials usually attain some length. I will now proceed to give what native booksellers call “ Selected Extracts.”

The following contains the quintessence of Phil. Robinson’s *chit* : “ Crows are indubitably the connecting link between devils, Class 3, inventors of all mischief, Prince Belial at their head ; and Class 4, malicious devils, under Prince Asmodeus.”

Eha writes : “ I have never been able to discover any shred of grace about an Indian crow. And what aggravates this state of things is the imposture of its outward appearance. It affects to be respectable and entirely ignores public opinion, dresses like a gentleman, carries itself jauntily, and examines everything with one eye in a way which will certainly bring on an eye-glass in time if there is a scrap of

truth in the development theory. But for this defiance of shame one might feel disposed to make allowances for the unhappy influences of its life ; for, in truth, it would be strange if a crow developed an amiable character. Even a consistent career of crime must be less demoralizing than the aimless vagabondage by which it maintains itself."

More mature consideration does not seem to have raised Eha's estimate of the corvine character, for in "The Common Birds of Bombay" that writer gives the bird the following *chit* : " I have never felt a qualm of conscience about taking a crow's life. It is not their depredations, nor their impudence, nor their rowdy noises. I could endure all these. What I cannot forgive is the constant and ruthless massacre of innocents that goes on where crows are allowed to have their own way. They watch every little bird to find out if it have a nest, they count the days till the first young sparrow flutters out on its untried wings, they pounce upon it and carry it to the nearest tree and hold it under one foot and pick it to pieces, absolutely callous to the shrieks of the parents as they



flutter round, distracted but helpless. For this I shoot the crow without remorse."

Lockwood Kipling dwells upon another aspect of the crow's character. According to him, these birds are "thieves, outcast scavengers, deceitful, and, above all other creatures that hoard and hide, clever in concealing things."

Jerdon, too, is very severe on the bird. He would take away its fine name, exchange it for some term of opprobrium, for he thinks that to describe the Indian crow as *Corvus splendens* "tends to bring into ridicule, among the unscientific, the system of nomenclature." Hodgson went one better. He actually did call the bird *Corvus impudicus*, but he could not induce other ornithologists to follow him, so the grey-necked crow still remains *Corvus splendens*.

Colonel Cunningham stigmatises the crow as "an irrepressible street gamin, ready for any fray, opportunity for theft, or occasion for annoying and tormenting his neighbours. As a rule, he is quite ready to say, with Madame de Longueville when exiled from Paris and condemned to stay with her husband in Normandy, 'Je n'aime pas les plaisirs innocents.' "

Mr. F. Finn, however, takes a more favourable view of the bird. According to him "the crow is a bird of many social virtues ; he will certainly rescue a friend in distress if he can, for his evident and loudly expressed indignation when one handles a dead or living comrade of his makes it plain that a less powerful enemy than man would probably be seriously attacked. Also he is a good husband, feeding his wife assiduously, and letting her pull their common booty away from him ; and a tender parent, much attached to his abominable offspring, in defence of which he will attack human beings at times." I agree with Mr. Finn, and have given the crow upon more than one occasion an excellent *chit*. I once took up a whole column of the valuable space of a newspaper in white-washing the bird. I have gone further. I have dedicated a book to him. For this I have been taken to task by a naturalist who loveth not the crow and who chided me for "most wrongly and perversely" affecting that "vilest of all vermin," the crow.

All I can say in reply is that I know of no bird or beast so amusing to watch as the crow. If any man can witness the doings of an Indian crow for ten

minutes without smiling, that man should at once apply for six months' leave on medical certificate. To me India without crows would be as insipid as lamb without mint sauce. I grant that the crow is a wicked bird, but his wickedness is of the attractive picturesque type.

Those who like not to read of villainies had better studiously avoid these chapters. To such I would recommend a book called "Sanford and Merton."





CHAPTER II.

HIS METHODS OF OBTAINING A LIVELIHOOD.

CROWS are the Yankees of the bird world. They can adapt themselves to any situation or circumstance. They are not tied down to one special kind of food, nor are their actions hampered by the Ten Commandments. They eat anything and everything. They will refuse nothing capable of being digested by an ostrich, and I imagine that they devour a great many things which even a *dak-bungalow khansamah* would hardly have the conscience to call digestible.

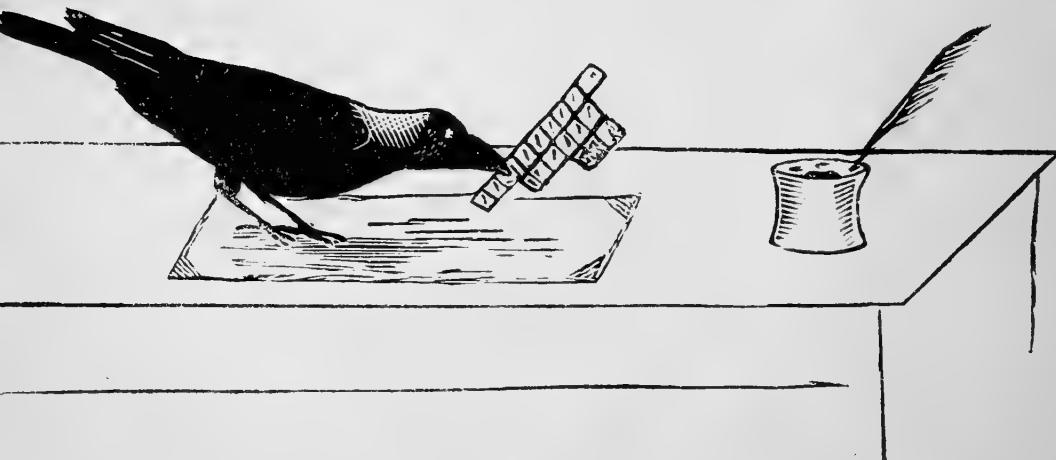
The ways in which crows obtain their food make a most interesting study.

The vultures are not allowed to devour a carcass in peace, there are always some crows who insist on sharing the gruesome repast. The corvidae are useful scavengers in their way for they will eat any refuse. As the municipal sweepers fill the dust-bins in Madras they are usually watched by a number of interested crows who boldly sit on the edge of the bin and

proceed to ferret about in it the moment the sweepers' backs are turned.

Crows are very partial to the crumbs that fall from man's table. A camp fire always attracts a crow or two, for to the corvine mind smoke spells food. Every Hindu as he takes his *al fresco* meal forms the centre of a little circle of these birds, for they are well aware that when he has finished there will be some leavings for them. Nor do they always wait until the meal is ended. They think that "hope deferred maketh the heart sick," so help themselves whenever they are given half a chance. Hence a native's dinner is often as exciting as it is frugal.

I have seen a crow quietly helping himself to food which a native woman was foolish enough to carry exposed in a basket on her head. The bird was



too clever to perch on the basket, for, had he done so, he would have betrayed his presence; he quietly flew along at the woman's own pace and served himself until he had eaten all he required. If there were butcher's and fish-monger's boys in India these would have to give up their practice of carrying meat and fish in trays on the head, for provisions carried in this way would never arrive at their destination in this country. A collection of crows is invariably to be seen outside the *sahib's* kitchen at the usual time when the cook, regardless of the principles of sanitation, casts forth into the compound the remains of the last meal.

Crows impudently invade the bungalow and steal whatever they can seize with their great beaks. They appear to have a use for everything portable—spoons, postage stamps and babies' socks seem to have a special attraction for the birds.

Having heard wonderful stories of the depredations of the crows in the General Hospital at Madras, I wrote to Captain D. C. Kemp, one of the Resident Surgeons, in order to obtain authentic information. I received the following letter in reply :—

“The crows have been such a nuisance in this hospital that we have had to have wire covers (like

meat covers, but with larger netting) made to protect the small tables beside each patient's bed.

On these side tables each patient has his or her daily portion of food, placed for his or her convenience. The crows watch out for the old and the infirm, or for those who have their limbs in splints or are otherwise obviously not able to move : one or more crows will victimise these unfortunate patients with the greatest ingenuity, and will certainly rob them of their food if there is no cover to protect the plates.

There used to be a dear old feeble lady in hospital who was obliged to wear a green shade to her eyes. This lady had almost to fight for her daily meals. Two crows would get down beside her, one on each side, and fairly worry the old lady's life with feint and attack before she could safely get her rations stored *in ventri*.

Many a time do these crows swoop down on letters and papers. In one case a Eurasian patient had just put down a letter he had received from some 'loved one' and a crow had just carried it off and was tearing it up in great style, to the chorus of the patient's

swear words, when the nurse entered the ward. Even then the bird declined to take any notice of flying mops and dusters.

We have a special staff of ‘crow-boys’ (*chokras* of about 8 to 14 years of age) whose *raison d'être* is the alarming away of these pernicious *corvi*.

Needless to say the staff is futile for the purpose. The boys are provided with string bows, with which to aim stones at Mr. Corvus.

I do not believe that anything short of gunpowder fringed with No. 4 or No. 8 will exercise the slightest influence over these companions of the poor,—who are always with us.”

Crows seem to be particularly partial to hospitals. The author of *The Civilian in Lower Bengal* relates the following anecdote.

“On one occasion as I was passing the principal police station (at Dacca) I saw a crowd gathered round, and went to ascertain the cause. There I found a beautiful Cashmeri woman lying on the floor with her robe almost off, and positively weltering in blood. It turned out that her husband had

cut off her nose—a little way Indian husbands have." The author ordered a search to be made for the nose and directed it to be fitted on again if found. The nose was found. The writer continues "I went away as I had plenty to do; but in the evening I called again at the hospital to enquire after the success of the operation; for, over and above my curiosity in the matter, I felt that, if successful, it would have some weight in overcoming the native prejudices against surgery after the European fashion.

The Sub-Assistant Surgeon came out to me with rather a blank face. 'A calamity has happened' he said, 'the *mehtar* (the servant who does dirty work) was instructed to wash the nose in a basin of clean water; he left it in the basin for a moment and while his back was turned a crow came in and flew off with it.' "

Often have I awoken in the morning to find that the crows have wrought sad havoc with my *chota haziri*. The toast has vanished, the sugar has sadly diminished in quantity, a few greasy streaks on a plate mark the place once occupied by a respectable

pat of butter; while nothing but the inconvenient shape of the jug has prevented the abstraction of the milk. I do not object very much to the crows taking my jam, but I think it distinctly bad form of them to afterwards clean their beaks on my table cloth.

Crows are guilty of yet more heinous offences than mere theft, they make no bones about highway robbery. A crow will rob one of its own species or any other bird or beast. I used to possess a greyhound which suffered much at the hands



of these bold robbers : while she would be eating her food one or two crows would come up and, having wished her good evening, one of them would peck at her back or tail, and, as she turned her head to give the impudent bird a *quid pro quo*, the other crows would snatch pieces of food from the dish. Upon one occasion the crows attacked her in such numbers that she was driven from her food and forced to look on, yelping helplessly, while the birds ate it up.

Is it to be wondered at that the crows flourish like the green bay tree? They are birds of prey. They like nothing so well as a tender young sparrow, fresh from the nest. Hence they make a special study of ornithology. Every crow is a first-class naturalist, and deserves to be made a member of the Zoological Society, but we do not receive our deserts in this world, and perhaps it is as well for the crows that we do not. If, however, their knowledge of natural history brings them no honour they derive much profit there



from, for they know the season of nesting for each species of bird and they raid every nest they discover. If they are so fortunate as to find young ones therein they promptly devour these. The crows recently ate up three young bulbuls which had been hatched out in a nest in the *chik*-house in my compound. If the young birds have not yet arrived the black villains eat up the eggs. They regard this as an act of virtue since they save the hen bird the trouble of uselessly sitting on her eggs. Crows are always on the look out for eggs. I have seen one snatch up a pingpong ball that had fallen on the grass and then spend an unprofitable half hour in vain attempts to extract the yolk.

Crows are very fond of fruit; they are always among the first birds to attack a ripening mulberry or cherry tree. Nor is this the only depredation they commit in the garden. They will, out of sheer cussedness, uproot plants and pluck flowers. It is needless to say that they scrape up and eat newly-sown seeds. Crows will also steal things which are not ordinarily accounted nutritious. They are especially addicted to flying off with the slips of paper which the enthusiastic gardener places in cleft sticks pushed into

the ground to mark the kind of seeds sown in that particular spot.

There is a certain old Colonel, whom I will not name, for he is not one to court fame, who stoutly declares that the crows, out of pure mischief, change the positions of these papers. He affirms that upon one occasion, when he put slips of paper to mark the position of some portulaccas and some phloxes, the crows actually had the effrontery to transpose those slips during the night. In justice to the crow and for the enlightenment of the reader I may say that the offenders belonged to the anthropoid species. Crows will steal these pieces of paper as they will steal and hide everything portable, but there is no credible evidence to show that they transpose the gardener's labels.

The crows always keep an eye on the ripening crops. They are expert farmers. They know to an hour when each crop is sufficiently ripe for them to eat it. They turn their knowledge to account, for the moment the crop is ready they betake themselves to the field and each bird selects a promising stalk and half hops, half flies on to the head, grasps it

with his foot, and pulls it to the ground, where the grain is extracted with beak and claws.

Crows despise not the humble insect. For them a flight of “white ants” or locusts is quite a windfall. Upon such occasions they make merry among the winged swarm, catching the insects in the air and transferring them to the beak while on the wing.

In those parts of India where the grass is green throughout the year many of the crows habitually, turn themselves into starlings and wagtails ; such may be seen on any *maidan* running along the ground after insects as mynas do. *Faute de mieux* crows will eat the ticks which infest the skins of cattle. Nothing is commoner in India than the sight of one of these birds on the back of a cow or buffalo busily engaged in picking ticks out of the skin of the quadruped. The skill shown by the crows in performing the operation is wonderful. They could give points to any dentist. They never seem to hurt or harm the cattle as the jackdaws in England often do while attempting to render a similar service.

Two or three crows may usually be seen attending the ploughman as he follows the “lonely furrow.”

They do this, not from love of the cultivator, but to secure the worms and grubs exposed by the plough.

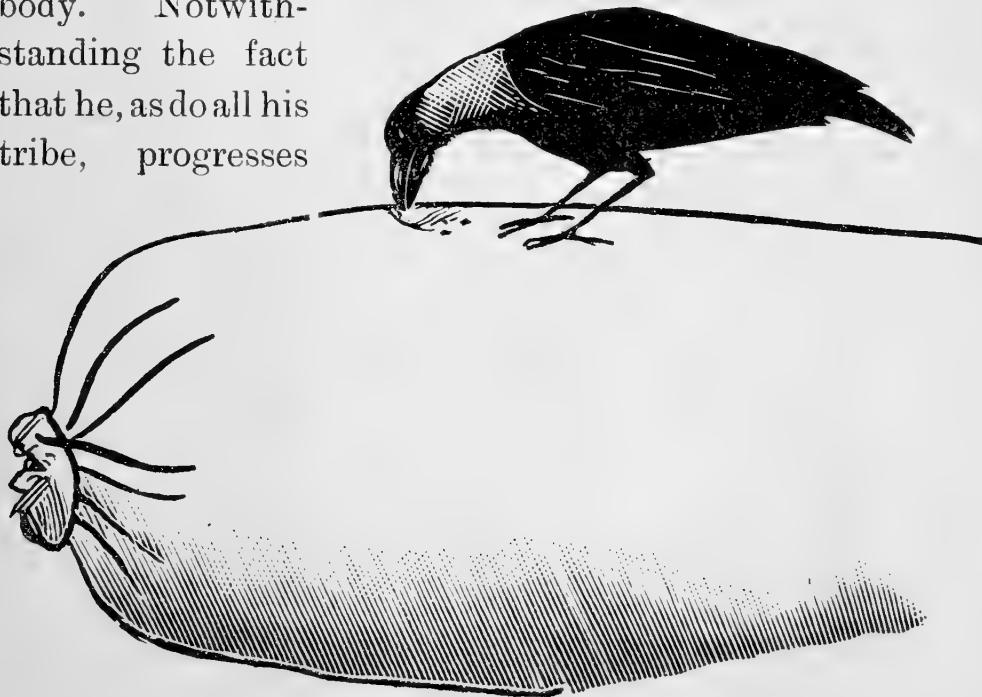
Every railway station in India has its colony of crows, which, like the hotel porters, meet each train and stalk up and down the platform with an eye for the main chance. I was once greatly amused by watching a party of these clever birds attacking a goods train laden with sacks of corn. The train had pulled up at a large junction, and, as is the way with Indian goods trains, seemed likely to wait there for many days. Meanwhile the crows were enjoying themselves. There were two or three of them upon each truck extracting with their powerful beaks the grain through the holes in the sacks. Whether the birds had made the holes themselves I am unable to say. I am inclined to think they had done so, for it is hardly likely that in this country, where "packing" forms a most important item on every invoice, the sacks would have been despatched full of holes.

Crows are very partial to tender young frogs, hence, after a heavy fall of rain, the versatile birds make for some flooded field and there hunt for crabs, frogs and insects.

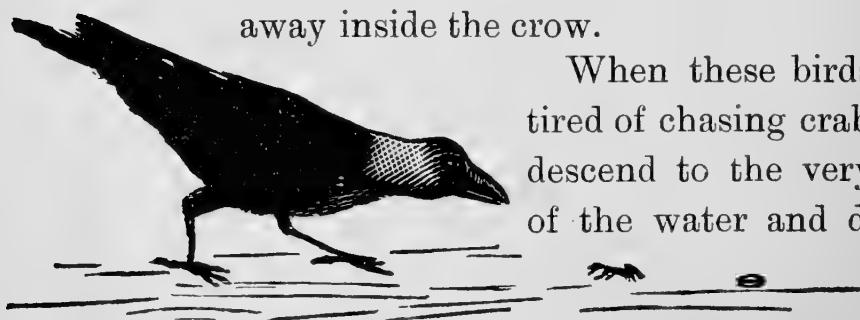
Jerdon states that "a few in the vicinity of the large rivers or creeks, follow vessels and hunt with the gulls and the terns."

I have often seen them at the mouth of the River Cooum at Madras squabbling with the gulls over fish cast away by the fisherfolk.

Some of the crows that dwell by the sea pick up a living on the sands, and their *modus operandi* is worth noticing. There lives in the sand a little crab. He is built for sprinting, having long legs and a light slender body. Notwithstanding the fact that he, as do all his tribe, progresses

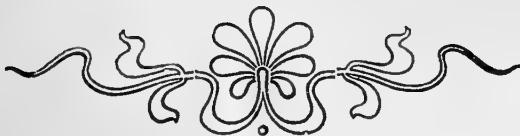


sideways, he is a swift runner. He appears to rely solely on his pace to secure his food. He makes for himself a burrow at the mouth of which he waits for his prey, which seems to consist of insects and small crustacea. When he espies one of these he makes a dash for it and seldom fails to catch it. If there appears to be no danger threatening he often ventures far from his hole. This is the chance for which a crow near by has been waiting, since the bird esteems this crab very highly as a table dish. He sees that his victim is far from home so makes a dash for him in hopes of grabbing him before he can regain the burrow. Whenever you see a crow running about on the sands as fast as his legs can carry him, twisting, turning and doubling, you may know that the crow is chasing one of these crabs. More often than not the crustacean appears to escape, but if he be caught he is not kept long in suspense as to his fate, for within two seconds he is comfortably stowed away inside the crow.



When these birds grow tired of chasing crabs they descend to the very edge of the water and dig out

of the sand, for a moment exposed by a receding wave, all manner of good things in the shape of crustacea and other small fry of the invertebrate world. This last is a very exciting method of obtaining food, for the crow, if he is not smart about the excavation, runs the risk of being washed away by the next wave. This, however, never happens. Crows are not often caught napping.





CHAPTER III.

HIS DOMESTIC AFFAIRS.

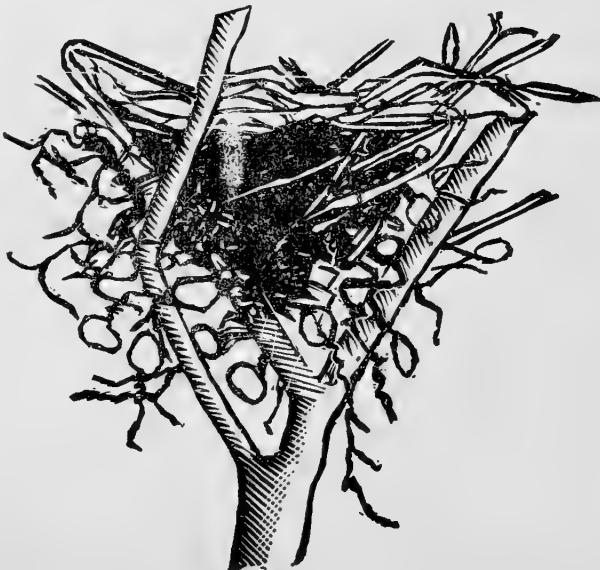
CORVUS Splendens, Esquire, is a family man. He does not keep his spouse waiting for dinner while he is losing money at Bridge in the Club. He is not one of that sort. He is a kind husband and an affectionate father. Although naturally greedy, he will actually allow his wife to take away food from him, a piece of self-denial of which many people refuse to believe the crow to be capable.

If the cock bird is a model husband the female is certainly a paragon of domestic virtue. Did not the sage Manu declare that a Hindu wife should resemble a crow? Does not the koel select the nest of the grey-necked species in which to place her eggs? Greater compliments than these could scarcely be paid to a bird. For Manu was a man who thought before he spoke. He selected as a pattern of

wifeliness a hen-crow on account of her very great devotion to her offspring, and surely this is the reason why the koel selects a corvine nest in preference to that of any other bird.

May, June, July and August are the ordinary building months for the crows. The nests seem to be placed indiscriminately in any kind of tree, and sometimes occur on buildings or even on telegraph wires.

A typical nest is composed of "an outer layer of sticks, the thornier the better, lined inside with grass." Seen from a short distance, it looks like a bundle of twigs thrown hap-hazard into a tree. But all crow's nests are not like this. Just as the bird does not limit itself to one kind of diet so does it not confine itself to one description of material for its nest. A Calcutta bird has made itself famous



for all time by constructing a nest out of wires used to fasten in the corks of soda-water bottles. Now Bombay is very jealous of Calcutta, and the crows of course ape their betters. Accordingly, the Bombay birds determined not to be outdone by the Calcuttaites. A pair of the former built a nest of gold and silver spectacle frames. The value of the materials used in the construction of that nest was estimated at Rs. 400. I believe I am correct in saying that the Bombay opticians, proud though they be of the local crows, do not encourage this method of nest-building ; indeed, to speak precisely, they set their faces steadfastly against these attempts at eclipsing the deeds of the Calcutta birds. Other crows which have a fancy for fire-proof nests steal bits of the wire used in constructing railway fences and utilise these for their nurseries.

At one time I was innocent enough to think that no Madras crow had entered for the nest-building competition and went so far as to state my belief in the columns of the *Madras Mail*. The result was a number of epistles from various parts of the Presidency, one and all, vindicating the character of the Madras crow.

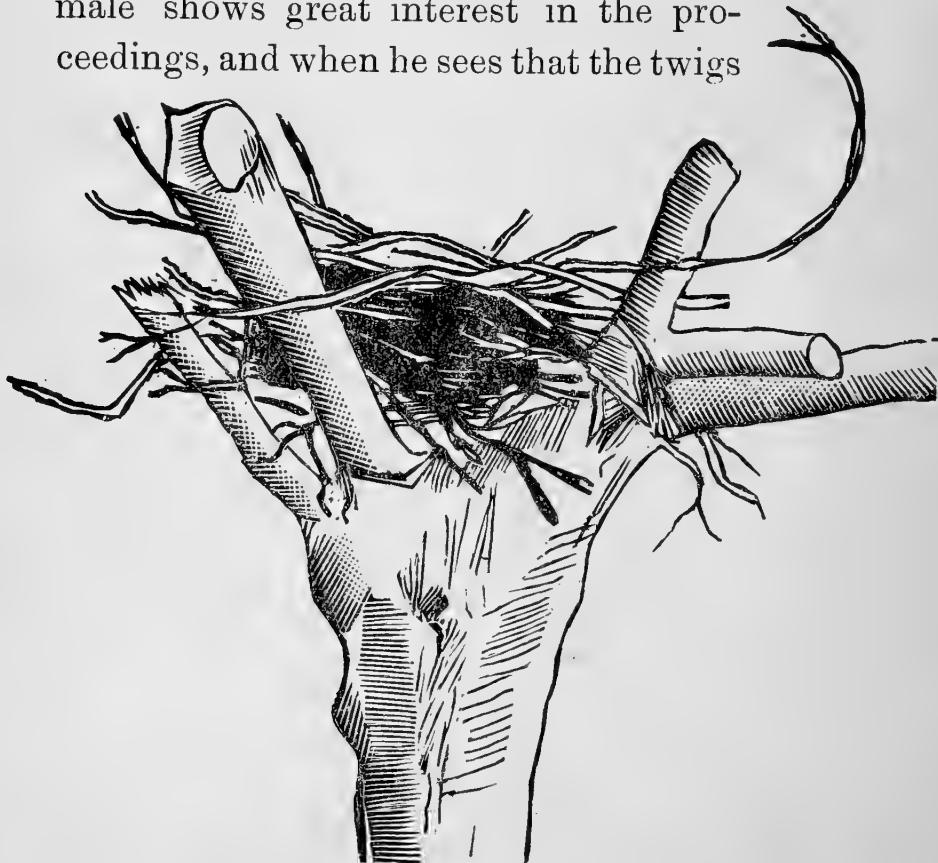
I was assured that the original soda-water wire nest was built in Madras, and certain it is that such a nest was constructed in Madras long ago. Not being an antiquary I am unable to give an opinion as to which city has the right to claim the invention. But the Madras crows can afford to do without it.

To use the words which occur so often in native papers, "a valued correspondent" informed me that a pair of Madras crows constructed a nest out of bits of tin taken from the Tin Bazaar. Another gentleman wrote to say that his father once took out of a Palmyra tree at Pallavaram a nest made of brandy-bottle wires. This, as the *Madras Mail* sagely remarked, says much for the sagacity of the local crow, but more for the consumption of brandy at Pallavaram.

But we must return to the normal nest and its method of construction. This is an untidy mass of twigs piled together in the angle of a forked branch.

Both birds collect material for the nest, but the husband appears to take no part in the actual building. He merely helps in the gathering of sticks. The male and female keep close company while nest-build-

ing is in progress. They collect twigs in the same place, and, having each secured one, fly off to the nest together. Upon arrival, the male transfers his stick to the female and hangs about while she fixes both twigs to the nest. This usually occupies only a few seconds ; but when a difficult point is reached the hen sometimes takes as long as five minutes in adjusting a refractory twig to her satisfaction. The male shows great interest in the proceedings, and when he sees that the twigs



are practically fixed, flies off, wily bird that he is, and thus obtains a start of a few seconds on his wife. She follows him at full speed, but he, thanks to his start, usually finds his twig first, but as he cannot, or, will not, do any building himself, he has to wait, stick in beak, until his better half has found one. If she is unusually slow he will go and hurry her up. If she secures her stick first she does not wait for him, so he has to accompany her empty-handed, or rather empty-beaked. He will not let her out of his sight.

Sometimes, after adding some material to the nest, the birds indulge in a little mild spooning on a house-top or other convenient locality. The spooning takes the form of head tickling. Crows, although great sticklers for etiquette, do not seem to object to such public demonstrations of connubial affection. But these interludes do not last long. Crows, while nest-building, are models of industry. A pair must add to the nest nearly thirty twigs in an hour, and the whole structure is completed in about two days. Crows take fallen twigs by preference, but if these be not available they wrench off green branches. Soon after the nest is completed the hen deposits in it two, three, or four green eggs splotched with

brown. She then sits on the nest most assiduously. The male appears to relieve her at intervals, but of this I am not sure.

Young crows are just masses of naked ugliness, but the parents watch over them as though they were the most precious things in the world. Under ordinary circumstances the nest is never left unguarded for a minute at a time. While the father



is looking for food the mother mounts guard, and the moment he returns she flies off,

leaving him to protect the young birds. Thus each parent takes its turn at sentinel duty.

The reason of this devotion is not far to seek. It is the penalty of wickedness. It is a case of thieves knowing the ways of thieves. Crows are notorious robbers of nests, neither eggs nor young birds come amiss to them. They know the evil that is in the corvine heart, hence the careful guarding of the young. But I think that there is a limit to the villainy of even a crow. I do not believe that a bird of the vicinity would eat a neighbour's brood, but no outsider crow would feel the least compunction in doing so. This, then, is the chief danger to be feared; a minor one is presented by the kites who make no bones about robbing a crow's nest.

One pair of crows built a nest within twenty feet of my window, hence I was enabled to watch operations closely. The eggs hatched out on the 4th July and the young birds did not leave the nest until 26 days later. It was amusing to see the parent birds fussing over the young ones, the former had to stand astride the nest for fear of injuring the tender occupants. Crows are naturally active, restless birds, and hence this constant standing over the nest must be very irksome to them.

Indeed, a crow perched by its nest with open beak and drooping wings looks the picture of boredom. This makes the careful watching all the more creditable to the bird.

I have said that under ordinary circumstances both parents never leave the nest at the same time until the young ones are about three weeks old. But any great excitement overcomes their maternal solicitude. Crows are very excitable birds. Suddenly every crow in the neighbourhood, for some reason not apparent to man, starts to caw at the top of its voice and fly wildly about in circles. When thus excited the birds will not stop even to pick up food thrown to them. On such occasions all the birds having young leave the nest and help to swell the uproar. The sight of a koel is quite sufficient to cause the parents to momentarily desert the nest. The koel knows this and utilises the characteristic to deposit an egg in the crow's nest. But of this more anon.

The care of the mother crow for her offspring does not end with nursery days. The little family keep together for weeks after the young birds are fully fledged.

One family composed of the parents and two youngsters interested me in particular, for it used to visit me with unfailing regularity at the breakfast hour. The father seemed to hold aloof, but the other three were inseparables. The young birds were quite as big as the mother but were easily distinguishable from her. In them the grey feathers of the neck are less sharply differentiated from the black than is the case with adult birds; and the inside of the mouth is red.

The young birds were exceedingly noisy. They squawked without intermission. They entertained the theory that the sole *raison d'etre* of the mother was to feed them, and their theory is strictly in accordance with the dicta of zoology. They followed their mother everywhere, and behaved like, what they were, spoiled children.

Whenever the mother managed to secure a piece of food, they would try to snatch it away from her. The mother would ruffle her feathers and sidle away from her too-importunate children; then, to the disgust of these, she would swallow, or, at any rate, half-swallow, the morsel of food.

In a few moments maternal affection would overcome her natural desire for the wherewithal to keep body and soul together, and she would "bring up" the food and thrust it into the gullet of one of the youngsters. It was amusing to watch the inward struggle between her natural greed and her fondness for her offspring that took place whenever she obtained any food. And, to give her her due, love of her children almost invariably prevailed, although sometimes the struggle was a severe one. On one occasion I saw the mother bird swallow, or half swallow, a piece of toast five times before she could bring herself to part with it.

Of course, as the youngsters grew older the mother bird yielded less and less frequently to their importunities.

This care of parents for their young *after* these have left the nest is an important phenomenon. If it did not exist newly-fledged birds would fare very badly in the fierce struggle for existence.



CHAPTER IV.

HIS HABITS.

THE crow is an early riser. Some time before “the roseate hues of early dawn” gild the morning skies he is up and doing. His uprising is attended by vociferous cawing. I presume that the first bird to awaken caws into his sleeping neighbour’s ear, and so on all along the line, until the whole colony is awake and shouting. Crows roost in company. At night all the corvidae of the neighbourhood foregather, discuss for a time the doings of the day, and then lose themselves in sweet slumber. Crows are not cursed with consciences, hence they sleep the sleep of the just in spite of many crimes. During the whole of a dark night not a single caw will be heard, but when the moon shines occasional “drowsy utterances” may reach the ear. These emanate from some misguided bird who awakes suddenly and while yet drowsy

mistakes the light of the moon for that of dawn. When he discovers his error he is very angry but does not say much for fear of rousing the rest of the colony.

Crows do not often make mistakes as to times and seasons, but an eclipse of the sun appears to be beyond their comprehension. "When the total eclipse of the sun occurred in January 1898" writes Eha, "the crows of Viziadroog, where I was encamped, were quite taken in and all gathered together in the sleeping tree. When day reappeared, almost before they had got their heads tucked in, they all started into the air with a simultaneous shout of surprise and indignation. They seemed to think a practical joke had been played upon them."

But to return to crows roosting at night. According to Colonel Cunningham "in event of a thunder-storm with vivid lightning or violent gusts of wind, sudden outbursts of expostulation occur at intervals."

This, I submit, is excusable. The most pious of birds ought to be pardoned for indulging in a little profanity under such circumstances.

The early morning toilette of the crow is not a lengthy affair, for the bird does not bathe until later in the day, presumably because he does not like his bath-water too cold.

From an hour or so after sunrise until sometime after sunset the crows may be seen performing their ablutions in any shallow piece of water such as an irrigation channel or a puddle formed by the overflow of a tank.

In Almora, where irrigation channels and tanks are unknown, the crows are sometimes hard put to it to obtain a bath. In the Himalayas water, when it is out of season, is almost as valuable as whisky. Every drop consumed in Almora had to be carried in a kerosine-oil tin up a considerable hill. My gardener used to keep a little hoard of the precious liquid in an old zinc bath. This the crows converted into a bathing *ghât*. It was not an ideal bathing place but was better than nothing. The *modus operandi* under such conditions is as follows: The bather alights on the edge of the bath, and having taken a good look round, for the crow is nothing if not cautious, he grips hard with his feet and toes

and plunges his head and neck into the water, agitating them violently and at the same time wagging his tail energetically and gently flapping his wings. There is thus a tremendous amount of splashing, so that the water reaches most parts of his body. Then the bird flies to a tree hard-by, shakes himself as a dog does, and violently preens his feathers with his beak, undergoing the most violent contortions in order to gain access to the more

inaccessible parts of his anatomy.

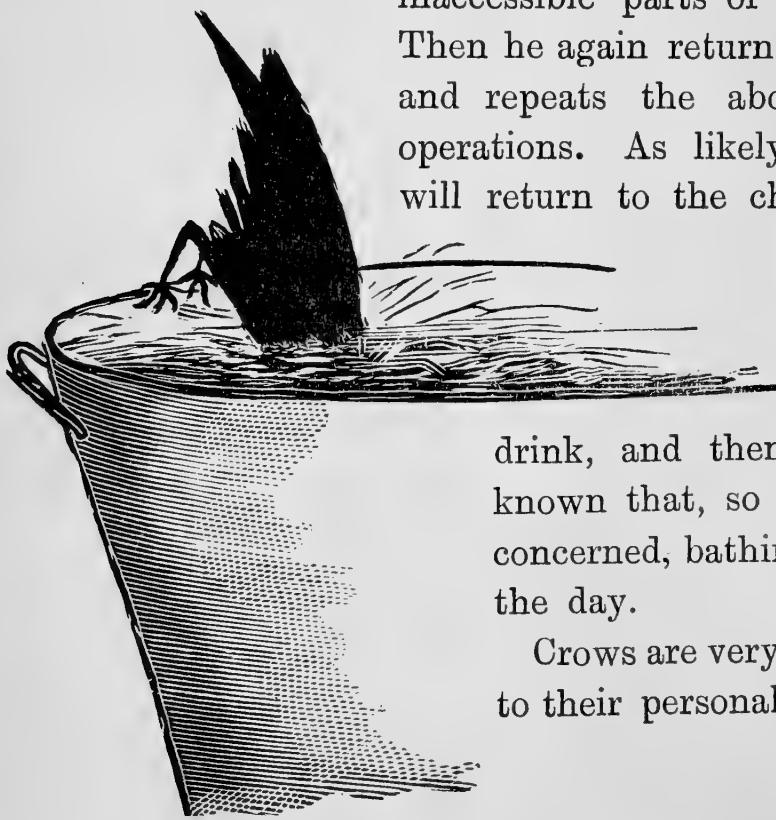
Then he again returns to the bath, and repeats the above series of operations. As likely as not, he will return to the charge a third

and even a fourth time.

Finally he takes a little

drink, and then it may be known that, so far as he is concerned, bathing is over for the day.

Crows are very particular as to their personal appearance.



I might almost say "too particular," for they seem unable to draw the line between this desirable characteristic and vanity. Narrow and low is the partition between virtue and vice. There is, moreover, no denying the fact that the crow oversteps the dividing line. He is a vain bird. The natives express this by saying "the crow stuck a pomegranate flower in his tail and thought himself a mighty swell." I have frequently seen the "treble-dated bird" literally gurgling with delight as he contemplated his reflection in the looking glass at the back of my sideboard.

Crows are so anxious that their tribe should make a good show that they set upon and slay all diseased members of their society. But they appear to be able to distinguish between natural and abnormal disfigurement. One often sees mangey-looking crows, innocent of a single feather on the neck, birds which might at first sight be mistaken for young vultures; but these are not molested. The baldness is, I believe, only temporary.



But anything really unusual the crows, like the little nipper, "can't abide." It seems to drive them momentarily mad and they set upon it and peck it to pieces. Some time ago I saw about twenty crows savagely attacking a companion whose legs had been tied to his tail by some mischievous person.

I am told that a Madras civilian, who retired some years ago, loved not the "ignoble crow." He never lost an opportunity of catching one. Having shaved off its feathers, he would paint the naked bird blue or red and then let it loose. It was immediately set upon and pecked to death by its former friends. This habit is said to be utilised by the gypsy folk who esteem crows highly as table birds. "A live crow" writes Lockwood Kipling, "is spread-eagled on his back, with forked pegs holding down his pinions. He flutters and cries, and other crows come to investigate his case and presently attack him. With claws and beak he seizes an assailant and holds him fast. The gypsy steps from hiding and secures and pinions the second crow. These catch two more, the four catch four more and so on, until there are enough for dinner, or to take into a town, where the crow-catcher stands

before some respectable Hindu's shop and threatens to kill the bird he holds in his hand. The Hindu pays a ransom of a pice or two and the crow is released."

Crows are highly social birds, and natives firmly believe that they hold *panchayats* and punish offenders. They certainly seem to hold what Phil. Robinson calls "cawcusses," but their social instincts do not appear to be so highly developed as those of the rook. This is probably the result of their oriental surroundings. The East has produced many saints but few citizens.

Crows, in spite of their boldness, are very difficult birds to tame. I have fed the same colony of birds for weeks but have never succeeded in getting a crow to take food from my hand. Colonel Cunningham was more successful. He writes in his interesting book, *Some Indian Friends and Acquaintances*: "At one time I used to feed a great troop of them every morning and evening; but although they so fully identified me as a source of supply that they never assembled for their daily dole whilst I was absent from Calcutta, and immediately resumed attendance

on my return, only two out of the whole throng ever ventured to take^t anything directly from my hands. They were very proud of themselves for doing so, and used to alight close to me, one on either side on the top of the railings of a flight of steps leading down from the verandah to a long terrace roof a little below. There they would wait in dignified composure, never condescending to join the noisy scuffling of their companions. As a reward for their civilised behaviour they were usually treated to a biscuit each, in place of scraps of bread that were thrown to the mob, and used to wait quite composedly whilst their friends were struggling for the inferior diet, in full confidence that their turn would arrive with the end of the vulgar entertainment. So fully persuaded were they that they would eventually be treated with distinction that pieces of bread handed to them were thrown away as beneath their notice. It was hard to resist the temptation of occasionally teasing them by affecting an intention of defrauding them of their natural tribute. If the biscuits were in evidence from the outset of the entertainment, their minds were at rest, but if kept hidden, it was amusing to note the anxiety that gradually set in as

the distribution went on, and the growing doubt as to the wisdom of rejecting actual bread in favour of hypothetical biscuit."

I hear that a resident in Madras has been more successful in taming crows than either Colonel Cunningham or myself; and that he has actually induced a crow to perch upon his hand and take food from him. I am further informed that the bird "brings up" that which it has recently sent down "red lane," in anticipation of the better things it is about to receive! What bird, other than a crow, would do such a thing?

Young crows, if taken from the nest, make entertaining but mischievous pets. Lockwood Kipling gives an amusing account of a pair of such birds kept by him. "They were miracles of naughtiness, delighting in sly destruction and odd turns of malice, ever ready to peck at a servant's hurrying heel, and especially given to torment a little dog who hated them. When he had a bone they came daintily stepping together and concerted measures against him, exactly like the stage villains of melodrama, manœuvring and skirmishing with keen enjoyment. On his part,

the dog learnt to watch and rifle their hiding places. Their delight in bright objects was remarkable. The spoon in my early morning tea, taken in the garden or verandah, was of even more interest to them than my buttered toast, and they were never tired of tugging at my watch chain, in order to get out the watch, a deeply coveted plaything. Everything of this shining sort that came within reach was promptly buried, dug up again, re-buried with elaborate precautions, and forgotten after a few days. In the hot weather they vastly enjoyed eating and playing with pieces of ice, which they hid for future use. But ice is a treasure fleeting as fairy gold, and the birds showed by the fussy action, sidelong squints, and interrogative turns of the head, which make them such diverting comedians, how deeply they were puzzled by its disappearance. ‘Surely, surely.

one would seem to say,
as he turned up the
corner of the matting,
‘I hid a cold chunk of
shining stuff here,—
but where is it?
Never mind, I will get



another.' So he would hop up to the table and take a fresh piece from the glass finger-bowl, itself a great delight to the glitter-loving birds. To the last the disappearance of the ice was a wonder. But, like that of some other comedians, their conduct was generally low ; the way in which they allowed themselves to be sent to bed (an old gate in an out-house), though free to fly at will, pacing meekly as good as gold, after a day of variegated crime, was their only lapse into real virtue."

It is a native superstition that the perching of a crow on the top of a house, or its hopping over it, predicts a visit from a friend or relative ; but its cawing is the forerunner of some bad news. Now there is some humour about this superstition. I do not think it extravagant to assert that on an average twenty or thirty crows perch in the course of the day on every house in India ; what a procession of visiting friends and relatives there must be ! Again, is it not a delightful belief that every time you hear a crow caw you are in for a bit of bad news ? Even as I write there are at least a dozen crows shouting bad news at me. Think of the magnitude of the crow population of India and of the birds' fondness

of cawing, is it then not a wonder that the whole country is not submerged in the sea of bad news which must serge in day and night?

I wonder how many millions of crows inhabit India. Consider the distribution of the bird. I once maintained that one or other of the species of crow was found everywhere in India, whereupon my readers encompassed me and beset me round like roaring bulls of Bashan. I was given to understand in no uncertain way that there were no crows in the Pulneys, and that the birds were unheard of at Mount Stuart, Anamalais. Not having been at either of those delectable places I was obviously at a disadvantage in the controversy. However, I had the satisfaction of noting that both *Corvus splendens* and *C. macrorhynchos* find a place in Dr. Fairbank's list of the birds of the Pulneys, while one "Big Bore" came to my aid as regards the crows of the Anamalais. But let us not bicker over trifles. Our grey-necked friend is certainly found in most parts of the country, and wherever he is found he flourishes like the green bay tree. To repeat what I said in *Longman's Magazine*:

The best way to judge of the extent of the corvine population of a town is to take up a position on the roof of the most lofty house in the place, just as the sun is about to sink below the horizon, and, from this point of vantage, watch the crows as they wend their way homeward after the labours of the day.

Crows, although the sworn enemies of man, like to roost in his vicinity. The crows of a locality sleep in colonies on trees preferably near human habitations. During the day they spread themselves over a considerable area, but at eventide they all return to their roosting place.

I once watched the home-coming of the crows from the roof of a house situated on a hillock in the little station of Rajahmundry on the Godaveri river. For the greater part of an hour the birds returned in several continuous streams. Such numbers arrived simultaneously that I found it impossible to count them. However it is no exaggeration to say that upon that particular evening some ten thousand crows flew over my head.

Some came in from the river banks, others returned from the islets and sandbanks which stud

every Indian river when it is not in flood. Many flew in from hamlets on the opposite side of the broad stream. Multitudes poured in from the neighbouring fields and jungles.

Considering that I could only see the birds which entered the station at one corner, and bearing in mind that a great many birds never leave the station, the corvine population of that little settlement cannot have been much less than fifty thousand.

Probably over a million crows dwell in Calcutta.

When the birds return at the sunset hour they exhibit no signs of lassitude. On the contrary, they seem most reluctant to retire to rest. There is much cawing and changing of positions before they eventually settle down for the night on the topmost branches of lofty trees.

Crows are early risers. Before the sun has appeared above the horizon their hoarse croaking is mingled with the cheerful notes of the drongos and magpie robins.

“Till in a gathered band of close array,

They take their flight to seek their daily food,”

and to make themselves generally objectionable to man and beast.



CHAPTER V.

HIS AMUSEMENTS.

THE struggle for existence does not press very heavily on the crow. It is obvious that a bird which eats anything will experience less difficulty in securing food than one which can live only on some special form of diet, such as insects, or honey, or fruit. The crow, therefore, has plenty of spare time upon his hands. Being the cleverest and the most intelligent of birds (all ornithologists are now agreed in placing the corvidae at the head of the fowls of the air), he is not content to sleep away his leisure. The crow is a restless bird. When awake he is never still for a moment. He must be doing something; when he is not looking for food he indulges in some game, and his favourite game is

that of playing mischievous pranks on other birds. He makes a point of pretending to visit the nest of every king-crow in the neighbourhood, merely to annoy the little drongos in possession ; but of this more anon. When a crow catches sight of another bird indulging in day-dreams in a tree, it swoops down upon it causing it nearly to die of fright, and then flies away emitting caws of explosive laughter.

Crows, of course, mob every strange bird they see. Like London street boys they cannot tolerate any "bloomin' furriners."

Some time ago I happened in the daytime to put up a large owl from the tree in which it was roosting. A couple of crows caught sight of the night bird, and were on it "like a knife." The owl alighted on the branch of a tree, the crows took up a position on either side of the owl, literally wedging it in. The three birds sat thus for some time, perfect silence being maintained, but the crows looked wickedness itself. The owl was in an unfortunate predicament ; it would have dearly loved to make an example of its tormentors, but it knew that if it attacked one of them the other would be able to set upon it from

behind. The owl therefore decided to make a move. The crows followed.

The owl was at an obvious disadvantage while flying for, its eyes being forwardly directed, it could not see what the crows were doing. It, therefore, soon came to rest on the branch of a mango tree. The crows, who were thoroughly enjoying themselves, mounted guard. Then the owl made a bold bid for freedom. It flew off at a great pace. The crows dashed after it.

At this juncture I lost sight of the comic trio, but I believe that one, at least, of the crows secured a beakful of the owl's feathers, for the pursuers suddenly desisted from the chase and returned to their companions, who greeted them with what appeared to be caws of applause.

A very favourite amusement of the crows is to give chase to a comrade who has been unfortunate enough to secure a piece of food, preferably a slice of toast, too large for him to swallow at a gulp.



The other crows all know as well as he does that he cannot eat this unless he settle down and secure it with his feet. They determine that he shall not do this, he declares he will. The game thus resolves itself into a bet between the holder and the rest of the players. He bets them he will swallow the toast, they bet him he won't. They chase him from tree to tree. After a little he secures a lead, alights, places a foot on the toast and tries to get a peck at it, but before he can do this his pursuers are upon him. He hurriedly snatches up the toast and again takes to his wings. Eventually he drops the bone of contention, thereupon another bird, taking up the bet, secures the toast and in turn becomes the chased. Before the game is over that piece of toast will have changed hands fifteen or twenty times. With each transfer it becomes more and more battered about, until, I suppose, it eventually becomes sufficiently small and sufficiently soft to be swallowed at a gulp. The swallower then retires and is presently seized with indigestion while the rest of the crows go off and play some other game. One piece of toast will amuse twenty crows for at least an hour.

It must not be imagined that the crow confines his mischievous attentions to his fellow-birds. Far from it. He is always ready to play a practical joke on any living thing.

Only last week I saw a poor pariah dog, whose ribs were coming through his skin, being tormented by a pair of crows. They had taken away a piece of meat he was eating ; not that they were hungry. They made no attempt to devour the morsel ; they merely flaunted it before the eyes of the ravenous dog, and when attacked by him. they flew off a little way and again jeered at him.

Some time ago I awoke to find a peacock sunning himself on my verandah. An " ignoble crow " then arrived upon the scene. It was evidently upon mischief intent. It strutted up to the peacock and then jumped over his back. The bigger bird affected not to notice the insult. Then the crow jumped over his head. This was too much for the peafowl, who took a peck at the " treble-dated bird " but missed it.

After again hopping over its victim the crow came up from behind and took a gentle pull at one of the train feathers. This offence was ignored. The crow then took a good hard pull. The exaspe-

rated peafowl then turned so savagely upon his assailant that the latter suddenly remembered that it had urgent business elsewhere. Could any assault have been more unprovoked ?

Every strange bird or beast which appears in any place is regarded as fair game by the local crows. It goes without saying that man is the favourite butt of the crows, for he is so easily "drawn." With the exception of a good meal, there is nothing which gives a crow so much happiness as disturbing a human being who is desirous of spending a morning in bed. To repeat what I said elsewhere. "When the weary Anglo-Indian determines to spend an 'Europe morning' all the crows in the neighbourhood manage to find this out. How they accomplish this I am unable to say for certain, but I strongly suspect that a *douceur* to the bearer does the trick.

Whether this is so or not it matters little ; what does matter is that the crows find out, and take up a position in the verandah at



dawn and ‘squawk’ in concert until they awaken the Sahib and make him so irate that further sleep is out of the question.”

Crows are especially severe upon golfers. The birds loiter about the links as loafers hang around a public house. When a player makes a long drive, a crow swoops down upon the ball, picks it up in his beak and flies off with it, while the golfer looks on and uses language of the description heard only on golf link.

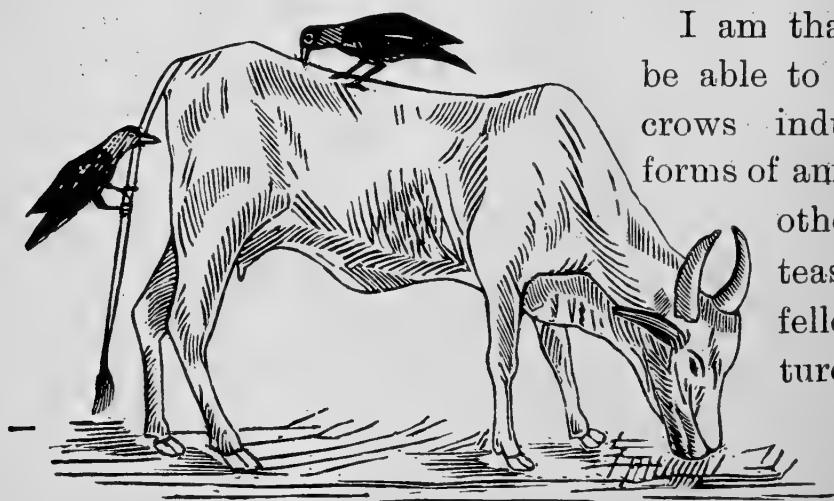
Sometimes, however, the tables are turned ; a golfer occasionally scores off a crow. Recently I had the pleasure of dropping an “approach shot” on to the back of a crow who was swaggering about in the neighbourhood of the “green.” Horace Hutchinson tells of a rook in England which was observed to continue sitting long after the other rooks of the neighbourhood had ceased to do so. The tree in which the nest was situated was growing on a golf links.

The members of the Golf Club investigated the matter and found that the rook was trying to hatch

a Silvertown golf ball! I have no doubt that crows are similarly taken in. I myself have watched a crow trying for half an hour to break a ping-pong ball in order to get at the yolk.

When it comes to rearing up their young all birds seem to be governed entirely by instinct, intelligence does not seem to come into play at all. Instinct teaches a bird at nesting time to sit upon anything in the shape of an egg. Hence the vain endeavours of one kite to hatch a pill-box.

Therefore, if any one wish to pay back any debts to a crow that person might do worse than deposit a golf ball in the bird's nest; an old ball will do quite well, nay better than a new one, for it will be more uncomfortable to sit upon.



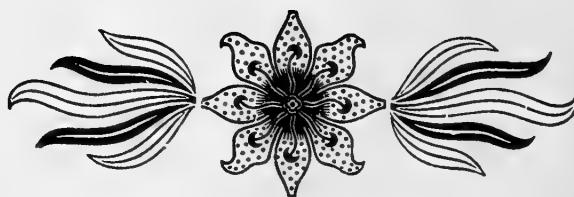
I am thankful to be able to say that crows indulge in forms of amusement other than teasing their fellow-creatures.

I once saw a couple of these birds thoroughly enjoying themselves sliding down a cow's tail just as small boys love to slide down the bannister.

The Madras crows seem to like paddling in the sea ; they delight to stand on the sand left wet by a retreating wave and dare the next to drive them off from that spot. If the wave accepts the challenge and comes up with such force as to threaten to wash the crows off their feet, these birds strut away unconcernedly as though they had caught sight of some object higher up the shore. You will never get a crow to admit that he has been "scored off."

"King of the Castle" is another game in which crows revel. These birds always sit by preference on some high seat, from whence they can look down on and jeer at their fellow-birds. A dozen crows may be seen sitting on any roof which goes up into a point. They are very partial to knobs of pillars ; as they stand on these they remind one of the pillar saints. In such positions they look as though they were doing penance, and so they are, for such a perch is most uncomfortable ; but just as a small boy will sit on a rough, hard wall in preference to a com-

fortable seat, so will a crow select an insecure perch on the top of a lightning conductor in preference to a secure one on *terra firma*. Crows are, in many respects, like naughty boys.





CHAPTER VI.

HIS FOES.

THE crow is a bird of many enemies. He is quite the Ishmaelite of the bird world. His hand is against all other species and theirs is against him. Since he will devour the young of almost every fowl of the air, lizards of any age, frogs of all sorts and conditions, and insects of numberless shapes and sizes, these must, one and all, be ranked among his enemies. But such small fry count for nothing. They are foes incapable of harming him, so that the crow, who is perfectly indifferent to public opinion outside his own clique, really does not care two straws whether such insignificant creatures like him or detest him.

With some of his enemies, however, the matter is very different.

Man, for instance, is a foe not to be despised, even by the crow.

Many human beings habitually shoot crows. Some do so simply because these "treble-dated" birds annoy them, while others do so in order to protect their pockets. These latter suspend the dead crow over a corn field as a warning to the rest of his kind.

In the olden times the crow was reckoned as good *shikar*. It is recorded in the Emperor Jehangir's game-book that the royal sportsman bagged over two thousand crows in the course of his shooting expeditions.

I understand that to-day Frenchmen in New Caledonia look upon our sable friends as game of the first water; hence the crows of that convict settlement have become as wily as the serpent, so that if a *chasseur* bags a brace as the result of a full day's shooting he feels aggrieved if the deed be not forthwith "crowned" by the French Academy.

Thomas Atkins must be numbered among the deadly enemies of the crow. The impudence of the

bird naturally puts up the back of a soldier bold, so the



latter never loses an opportunity of capturing a crow, who, when taken prisoner has to submit to all manner of indignities. One bird was made for his sins to go through life with his neck through a Wills' cigarette tin, in the bottom of which a hole had been punched. The crow who had to wear this collar must have led rather an unhappy life, for, besides, being the laughing stock of his companions, he must have found a cigarette tin a most uncomfortable article of apparel. Another crow, whom I have the honour to number among my acquaintance, has a little bell tied round his neck, which tinkles as he flies about. He has worn this bell for years ; it does not appear to cause him any inconvenience and it is possible that he is very proud of the appendage. Crows, as we have seen, are vain birds.

It is perhaps hardly fair to call the kite an enemy of the crow. The two species are certainly constantly squabbling and fighting, but this is rather a matter of jealousy than of enmity. Both birds eat much the same kind of food and obtain it in an equally questionable manner, so that a certain amount of rivalry, accompanied now and again by some bickering, is inevitable. I have witnessed a good

many fights between kites and crows, but I have never seen any damage inflicted. I suspect that each bird is frightened of the other, so their fighting is very stagey.

The king-crow, however, must without doubt be classed among the enemies of the crow. The little black drongo is the self-constituted policeman of the birds, he is constantly on the look out for offenders which he punishes summarily, therefore, just as the village *badmash* delights in giving trouble to the policeman and the magistrate, so do the naughty crows do their utmost to annoy the king-crow, who is judiciary and executive rolled into one.

The drongo looks upon the tree in which his nest is situated as his castle and attacks most viciously every man, bird, or beast who dares to approach that tree. I recently saw a couple of king-crows mob a monkey which had chanced to climb the neem tree in which their nest was placed. The monkey did not stay long in that tree. The king-crows were on him like a whirlwind, and it was not until the monkey had fled fully a hundred yards that the plucky birds left him in peace.

Crows, out of pure mischief, make a point of looking in at every king-crow's nest they come across, just to enquire after the health of the youngsters, and, if the opportunity presents itself, to eat them up. The crows rarely reach the nest. There is no bird more vigilant than the drongo, so that while the aggressor is yet far off the gallant little fellow dashes out to meet him. The crow, not being over valorous, suddenly discovers that he has forgotten something, his card case for preference, and turns back, hotly chased by the king-crows who endeavour to get above him and secure a beakful of feathers. I do not think that they often succeed in getting a punishing blow home, for the crow, when pushed, is capable of showing a fine turn of speed. Be this as it may, one of the commonest sights in India during the months of June, July and August is a couple of tiny specks giving chase to a great crow.

Last hot weather some drongos and crows elected to nest in the same tree, and it chanced that that tree was growing within a dozen yards of my office in the Fort at Madras. The Battle of the Yalu River sinks into insignificance when compared with

the long struggle between the rival birds. The angry screams of the king-crows as they chased their foes lasted almost without intermission from 10-30 to 4-30. I took the trouble to time the frequency of the attacks, and found that in thirty minutes the pair of drongos gave chase to offending crows no fewer than sixteen times. Assuming that there were fourteen hours of daylight in the twenty-four, then, every day whilst nesting operations were in progress there were about 450 separate fights between those king-crows and the splendid birds.

There is a certain horned owl which is said to devour crows.

Sober books of natural history assure us that the owl does do this, so I suppose we must believe it, but it makes a considerable demand on one's faith. What a fine thing it would be to watch the tragedy ; to see on a moonlit night, a great owl swoop silently down upon the crow's nest, upset the sleeping parents and make off with a young one before the old birds have realised what has happened. The rage of these when they had awakened sufficiently to realise what had happened would be a sight for the gods.

The arch-enemy of the crow is the koel, the bird whose crescendo note drives the European to distraction, but is, to the ears of the Asiatic, divine music. The koel is a cuckoo and hence declines to build a nest or to rear up its own young. Cuckoos live up to two mottos. These are : "Never do yourself that which you can make another do for you" and "To do others in the eye is the noblest of all deeds."

Now cuckoos are brilliant criminals. There is some humour in their crimes. They remind me of the dacoits who looted the camp of the late Lieutenant-Governor of the United Provinces. As a rule, cuckoos are not content to compel some wretched little bird to do their nursemaid's work for them ; they take a positive delight in making fools of the birds which pride themselves on their vigilance and cuteness.

One cuckoo has actually selected the king-crow, of all birds, as its victim. It is able to perform this astounding feat by dressing up like its dupe. It puts on black plumage and decks itself in a long forked tail. Thus, when it is seen side by side with a real king-crow, it is not easy to say which is which. The drongo himself cannot distinguish this cuckoo from

his own brother so allows it to approach quite close to the nest. As soon as the owner's back is turned the cuckoo, which is playing the rôle of the lion in the ass's skin, deposits an egg in the nest, which the drongo, who is not a mathematician, fails to "spot" on his return.

The koel adopts another method of procedure. The male bird is black and rejoices in a fine long tail. The grey-necked crow cannot bear the sight of the bird, which he attacks the moment he sets eyes on it. This is exactly what the cuckoo desires. He flies up to the crow's nest, making insulting remarks, and turns tail the moment the owners of the nest go for him. The birds then play a grim game of hide-and-seek. The koel, who is a faster flier than a crow, leads the way through thickly wooded places, jeering at his pursuers the whole time to stimulate them to continue the useless chase. The crows make every effort to overtake the aggressor, vowing the most awful vengeance. Presently there comes wafted across the air the welcome sound of "Kuil, kuil, kuil," then the cuckoo knows that the strategy has been successful, that the fell deed has been done, so he hurls some

parting insults at the crows and flies right away, laughingly answering his wife's cry, and chuckling over the way in which the crows have been duped.

These meanwhile have returned to the nest. Although they are so clever and cunning they cannot count above two. Crows know only of three quantities—nothing, one, and more than one. Hence if there be already three eggs in the nest they will not detect the addition of a fourth. It is not known for certain whether the koel destroys any eggs which are already in the nest. The fact that crow's nests have been found containing but one egg and that laid by a koel, seems to indicate that the koel does destroy the eggs already in the nest, for it is improbable that she deposits her egg in an empty nest.

The surprising thing is that the young koel does not have its neck wrung directly it emerges from the egg. But all young birds born in nests are much alike. They are without exception as ugly as sin.

Nevertheless when the feathers grow the foster-parents should have no difficulty in discovering the nature of the strange nestling. Some authorities think that the crows do make the discovery, but have

already grown too fond of the youngster to destroy it. Thus Mr. Finn writes "probably by the time that the hen crow awakes to the fact that she has been 'sold again' maternal affection—that powerful force which makes cats foster rats, and wolves babies—has asserted itself to such an extent that she cannot bid the intruder begone." Personally I am inclined to believe that the maternal affection of birds is greatly exaggerated. It is true that birds look well after their young, that they will deny themselves in order to feed them and will fight most bravely in their defence. But is this maternal affection as we understand it? I think not. It is mere instinct. If it be maternal affection how are we able to account for the fact that swifts and swallows in England, when the time for the autumnal migration arrives, desert their late broods, leaving them in the nest to die of starvation? To my way of thinking it is blind instinct that makes the mother bird look after her offspring or whatever else happens to be in the nest. This instinct is so deeply implanted in the bird that she will sometimes give her life to save her young. But in migratory species the migrating instinct is stronger than the

maternal one. When the two instincts come into opposition the more powerful prevails—the birds migrate and leave their young to perish. If it be not blind instinct that teaches birds to rear up their young, how can we account for the same pair of wagtails bringing up young cuckoos in two successive years?

Koel nestlings are not so utterly depraved as some young cuckoos are. They do not seem to be in the habit of murdering their foster-brethren by pitching them over the side of the nest.

Crows certainly appear to be fond of their foster-children, they are probably much taken with their long tail. Eha states that he once saw “a pair of crows feeding a clamorous young koel, together with its foster-brother, their own child. It was hungry and clamorous too, but the koel appeared to be the favourite with the parents.”

But perhaps the arch enemies of the crow are the wicked divinities who live in Hades, for, according to the Mundas of Chota Nagpur, (and they know as much about the matter as anybody does) the afore-

said evil divinities are the cause of the nigritude of the splendid birds.

Thus runs the legend : The wicked gods finding fuel cheap in the nether regions set up smelting operations. The fire, smoke and heat annoyed the great god Sing Bonga, who issued orders that the furnaces were not to work day and night. This seems very reasonable of him, yet the naughty, naughty divinities refused to obey the order.

Sing Bonga in anger—I quote from Mr. Bradley-Birt, who is an authority on Chota Nagpur and its people—“sent two king-crows and an owl to warn them, but they only flippantly waved their furnace tongs at them, trying to catch them by the tails. Then Sing Bonga sent a crow. Now the crows were formerly white, but when the unfortunate representative of the family reached the iron workers they caught him and smoked him black, sending him away thus disfigured to show their contempt for Sing Bonga’s orders. The crows have never recovered the indignity and have remained black ever since.” But crows are not birds to be upset by trifles. They have the good sense to make the best of a bad job.

"They do not" writes Phil. Robinson, "wear their colour with humility or even with common decency. On the contrary they swagger in it, pretending they chose the exact shade for themselves.. In the verandahs they parade the reverend sable which they disgrace ; sleek as Chadband, wily as Pecksniff. Their step is grave, and they ever seem on the point of quoting scripture, while their eyes are wandering towards carnal matters. Like Stiggins, they keep a sharp look out for tea-time, and hanker after flesh pots."



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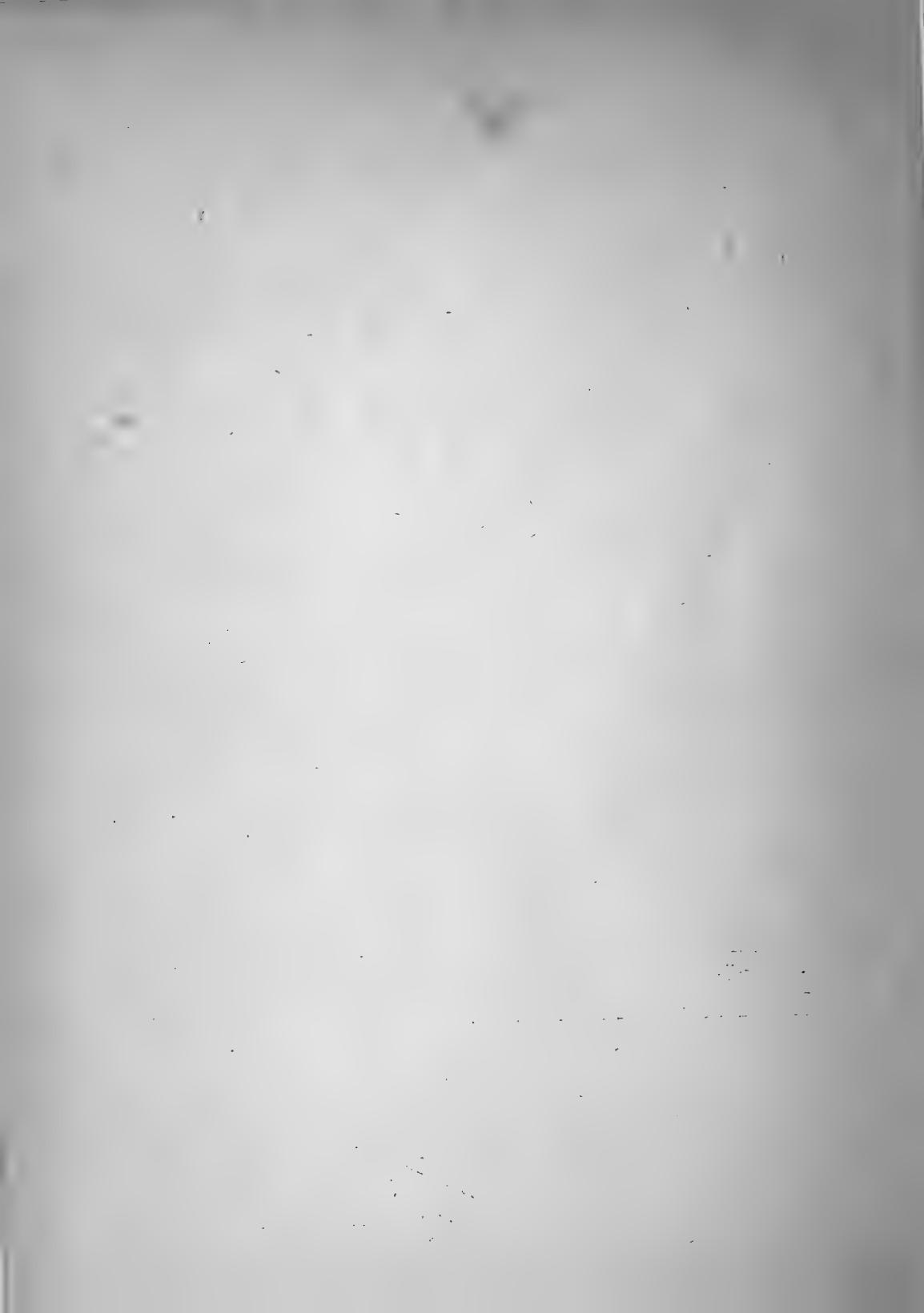
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